

4-6-1999

Antoon, Grace Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Recommended Citation

Repository citation: Schakel, Ben, "Antoon, Grace Oral History Interview: Class Projects" (1999). *Class Projects*. Paper 56.
http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/class_projects/56

Published in: *History 201 Oral History Interviews (1999) (immigrant residents of Holland) (H98-1351)*, April 6, 1999. Copyright © 1999 Hope College, Holland, MI.

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Interview with Grace Antoon
Interviewed by Ben Schakel on 4/6/99
History 201 - Larry Wagenaar's Michigan History Class
Spring 1999 Semester

BS: What part of the Netherlands did you emigrate from?

GA: From the city of Groningen which is also the province of Groningen. It's like New York, New York. This is Groningen, Groningen. It's the Northern part of the Netherlands and it borders Germany on the East side.

BS: Could you describe what it was like to live there?

GA: I lived there for twenty-one years, I was born and raised there. I left in 1950. Up until my tenth year it was a nice country to live in, I had parents and two brothers and two sisters and of course then the war started (WWII) so five years of war. I was fifteen when the war ended so those were not such nice years. But we had a nice childhood. My dad worked for the city of Groningen. He was the city treasurer, that's what he was doing. I enjoyed my childhood, I was next to the youngest.

BS: Could you tell me what promoted you to emigrate or leave your homeland?

GA: I was the only one in my family. I came with my husband, because his aunt and uncle from Wisconsin came to the Netherlands in 1947 or 48. Of course things were not yet built up, buildings were still down from the bombing and also when we were liberated there was a lot of fighting going on. So they came to see the Netherlands and they said you can do much better in the United States. There were still rations, we couldn't get enough food and clothing. So my husband's mother and her sister wanted to be together the sister from Wisconsin and my mother-in-law lived in the province of Groningen in a village called Winsum. So they put their name down with the consulates, I believe the

American consulate and were waiting for three years and so we came. There were nine of us.

BS: Who did you travel to the United States with?

GA: With my husband, his sister and husband, and a little two year old, the five of us. The other four came six months later by plane because my husbands father owned a hardware store and a couple of homes he had to sell first. So they came in May of 1951 and we came in December of 1950.

BS: Why did you choose the United States and not another country?

GA: That's because we had relatives here. Not only the aunt and uncle but also seven cousins I'd never met them before.

BS: Where did you first go in the U.S.?

GA: We first ended up in Waupun, Wisconsin on a small farm two days before Christmas. It was the coldest winter ever. It was 40 below. There was a lot of snow. It was an unusual cold winter with lots of snow but we had a very warm welcome by the family who I'd never met before. They didn't take us in as strangers but as family. We had a very warm welcome there.

BS: Can you tell me why you came to Holland, Michigan?

GA: Well after three years in Wisconsin we moved to Chicago and lived there eight years. Then in the summers we would come to Holland and live in a cottage because we knew some friends here and family. We liked it, I was always teased, they said "Yeah, Grace likes it because it's called Holland." But that wasn't it. We liked the friendliness of the people, the shoreline. So after eight years we sold our house in

Chicago and came to Hamilton, Michigan. In 1962 we moved to Hamilton, and we moved in 1978 to Holland.

BS: What were your first impressions of Holland when you moved here?

GA: I liked it. It reminded me somewhat of back home because in the beginning I was quite homesick and was sorry I ever emigrated. No longer so, now this is home. Mostly friends and family and the environment of Holland.

BS: Could you describe some of the problems you faced adjusting to life here in America and Holland.

GA: Well I thought I could speak quite a bit of English since I had five years of it in school, but English is just not the same in England or America. We learned fast, also traditions. For instance there was not a Santa Claus here but we were given presents at Christmas time. There is not a second Easter day or second Pentecost day. The holidays are not as many here. We discovered when you join a church you make friends easier than when you do not, and also when you have children and they grow up, they come home with friends. You join a choir and the societies from church. That overcame our homesickness. Problems were sometimes about nationality. For instance in Wisconsin for a start we took anything we could get for work so we worked in the shoe factory. At that time there was a war going on with Korea. So when they received a government order to make boots for the soldiers we were not allowed to work. We were just let go and of course we only worked there a short time and after that there was no income. Those were a few of the problems, but we overcame, we were young. Maybe a little bit naive but we managed.

BS: Where were you first employed in Holland?

GA: In Holland I was very lucky, I saw an add in the paper. This was in 1962, someone who knew English and could translate and shorthand and typing and bookkeeping. I just happened to know all these things so I applied. I had four children but I did get the job which, at that time was called the Netherlands Information Service. Mr. Wichers was the director. Later on it became the Netherlands Consulate and is now known as the Holland Historical Trust. I worked there for 29 years, with pleasure.

BS: That's the only job you've had since you moved to Holland?

GA: That's right. The one and only.

BS: How did the move affect your family?

GA: Well of course my children were born here, all four of them. My parents in the Netherlands were not too happy to see me go. But we all did fine, we all got good jobs and raised our families. Most of them are college graduates--either nurses or police officers or couple of them graduated from Calvin and even got their masters degrees so we did all quite well. A total of ten grandchildren from these three families.

BS: What traditions did you bring that are still part of your family from the Netherlands?

GA: Not really, sorry to say, any. We spoke Dutch first in the house for the children's sake, but my husband didn't know the language and he preferred that I spoke English to him. It also brought problems with our children. They only spoke Dutch at first and not English and that gave a problem playing with friends outside. Another tradition, we did Santa Claus the first couple of years and then the children would say well we've got packages from Santa Claus. Well the kids would say Santa Claus isn't coming until

Christmas so we just dropped that part of it. We would celebrate birthdays more I think than Americans do. Even as adults we do get together with family and friends. But my children love the Dutch chocolate and Dutch licorice whenever I go to the Netherlands I have to take some back. We pretty well adjusted and became quite American.

BS: Why have you stayed in Holland all this time?

GA: I like it here. I really do. I do go back to the Netherlands occasionally about once a year. We've lived in Wisconsin and Chicago and in the winter at times vacation in Florida. Going back to the Netherlands is nice to visit but not to stay. I do like it here very much, nice neighbors, nice friends. My children, two of them live around here. The strange part of it is one of my daughters, the oldest, met a Dutchman in Grand Rapids, in college. He was an exchange student. She married him and she moved to the Netherlands. So I also have a daughter in the Netherlands and three grandsons. A good reason to go back.

BS: In what ways have you been involved in the Holland community?

GA: At Tulip Time I worked in the Holland Museum. I helped at school with the children. I would read to the children. Do society work from church. I can't really say I joined a club or a choir. I was really busy raising a family until I retired at 62. So we had four children and I was a busy mother.

BS: Do you have a church affiliation in Holland?

GA: Yes. I'm a member of the Park Christian Reformed Church.

BS: What influenced your discussion on what church to attend?

GA: This is from back home. I was also raised in the Christian Reformed Church. When we first came to Wisconsin our family belonged to the American Reformed Church. There was a Reformed Church across the street and there was a minister who spoke also Dutch. Very friendly, we were welcomed there. They even had a welcome shower for us with nice household goods because all we had were our wedding presents. They gave us food and dishes and sheets and blankets and they were very kind. We stayed with this church until we moved to Chicago and then we went back to the CRC. But to me it doesn't make any difference. I would go back to the other reformed church in no time. There is no problem there.

BS: Holland is increasingly becoming more culturally diverse. When you see newer emigrants settling in Holland how do you feel about that? Does it remind you of when you came?

GA: Yes. As an emigrant I can not say anything but welcome. Especially the people from the South or other countries. We did not come because we lacked work or anything like that. It was a family reunion. That's really the reason we came. But others want to improve and come for economic reasons. They have their rights but their duties as well.

BS: What are your feelings that Holland is more or less becoming a largely Hispanic and Dutch community?

GA: I'm still proud to be Dutch and I'm very proud to see what the Dutch have accomplished here after Reverend Van Raalte's arrival. The beautiful parks, the churches and the schools. Hope College being one of them. I hope the Mexican people

will contribute as much.

BS: What are your feelings on Holland's Asian community? Do you see them facing the same problems or opportunities you faced?

GA: They may. It sounds very biased but when I was living in Chicago, this was in the late 1950's. I felt kind of bad because they would call me and say, "Could you come and vote?" I said I will go when my husband comes home, I have three children. "Oh we'll come and baby sit for you, we'll come pick you up," and I thought to myself are they doing the same for the black people as they do for me, this courtesy. So that always made me feel a little uncomfortable. I really think being white, it's a shame to say but it's all over the world the same, is an advantage. Sorry to say so and I hope that will change in the future because we can't go by face value. Even the Dutch fail at times.

BS: How do you feel about Dutch heritage in Holland, and the Dutch heritage that Holland has tried to preserve?

GA: I think that's splendid. Since it was settled by the Dutch. I'll never miss anything at Tulip Time. I go to all the parades and to the art show and whatever there is to see I attend. I feel very proud of what they have accomplished here. All of these volunteers, especially these Dutch dancers with their expensive costumes and their wooden shoes, giving so much of their time, it makes me feel great.

BS: What are your feelings during the Cinco de Mayo festival in Holland?

GA: It's fine they have their traditions, and that's good as long as it doesn't interfere with ours. I remember working at City Hall there was a problem because our dates didn't

work out and I think there should be a little more cooperation between the two groups.

I am no longer working at City Hall so I really don't know what's going on. I live in the winter time in the Netherlands and the summer times here so I am missing out on a few things but more cooperation would be well I think.

BS: Have you yourself ever experienced any discrimination in Holland?

GA: Not that I'm aware of, not really no.

BS: What paths have your children taken?

GA: My one son went back to Wisconsin where he was born, and teaches at a university there. My daughter in the Netherlands is an R.N. One is a social worker in a hospital in Grand Rapids. The fourth one is a sales representative. She was a full time mother and just started working again.

BS: Do they speak any Dutch?

GA: Very little. Of course the daughter in the Netherlands speaks it fluently. She did not at first but she went to school there and learned it fast.

BS: Are they interested in their and your Dutch heritage?

GA: Yes very much so, in fact my son gave me twenty tapes and I have to talk about the day I was born, as if I should remember, and my childhood days and the war and my brothers and sisters and my parents. So yes they are very much interested, especially my son. Once in awhile I tell stories about growing up in the Netherlands and working there, but I was 21 when I came here. Quite young, just married.

BS: What would you say to a friend in the Netherlands who is considering moving to the United States and Holland?

GA: Be sure you know what you are doing. If you are happy in the Netherlands, you have a good job, you're living well, stay where you are because you leave family behind. You don't realize it until you come here, when you have babies there is nobody to show them to or when a child is baptized, graduates, or gets married. My parents have been here, my mother a couple of times. You will leave your homeland behind and your family. You have to be very strong and take whatever you can to make a dollar. Don't be picky, I started working in a factory, while I left my job in the Netherlands working at a bank. I started work in a shoe factory at 75 cents an hour. The experience makes strong people.

BS: That's all of the questions I have on my sheet.

GA: Do you have enough information? Can you make something from this? Was I too lengthy?

BS: Oh, not at all. Thank you.